28 August 2001
English
Original: Spanish

Committee on Conferences
Substantive session of 2001

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Mr. Guillermo E. **Kendall** (Argentina)

IV. Translation and interpretation-related matters

B. Language services recruitment-related issues

Introduction and overview

1. At its 437th and 438th meetings, on 27 and 28 August 2001, the Committee considered the report of the Secretary-General on excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations and issues relating to the recruitment of language staff (A/56/277), which had been prepared in response to requests made by the General Assembly in section IV, paragraphs 11 and 12 of its resolution 55/222.

2. The Committee was reminded that the statistical information in the tables reflected the situation as at 30 June 2001. Percentages of vacancies could change dramatically over a short period at duty stations where small numbers of posts were involved.

Discussion

3. The report was commended for underscoring the importance of coordination among duty stations in overcoming the problem of excessive vacancies. Achieving a balance between cost-efficiency and equal quality of services was a complex staffing problem. The cost-effectiveness of temporary assistance varied greatly for duty stations. Whereas the Geneva duty station, for example, could draw on a large pool of local skills, smaller duty stations generally had to hire non-local freelances at higher cost, hence the greater urgency of filling vacant regular posts at such duty stations.

4. The view was expressed that the limit on how much United Nations retirees could earn per year should be raised because it limited access to a valuable, highly

skilled resource, which was part of a limited pool of highly qualified freelances. When that pool had been fully tapped, the quality of services could suffer.

5. Concern was expressed that rates of self-revision exceeded recommended levels. Translation quality became a problem when there was a lack of revision capacity. It was pointed out, however, that self-revision did not necessarily result in a loss of quality when there was a high proportion of experienced translators at a duty station.

6. Support was expressed for the training initiative proposed in the report and increased cooperation between the Organization and universities and other institutions offering language training.

7. It was felt that the problem of high or excessive vacancy rates in language services could only be overcome by a package of incentives. It was pointed out that the need to ensure uniform treatment of language and non-language staff currently limited the types of incentives that could be offered. Some felt that mobility was the most effective approach to addressing vacancies in language services and welcomed the streamlined procedures for lateral transfers of language staff as a step in that direction.

8. The view was expressed that it would be hard to resolve recruitment problems without a radical change in approach to open up what had become a closed system. What was needed was a system of selection and rotation of staff that regularly brought in younger people conversant with contemporary language. The recommendations in the report were sound as far as they went, but the Committee should closely monitor developments in the area of recruitment.

Conclusions and recommendations

9. The Committee acknowledged the report of the Secretary-General (A/56/277).

10. The Committee welcomed the decrease, since the last reporting date, of the overall vacancy rate for language services, and the significant improvement recorded at all duty stations with a history of chronically high vacancy rates.

11. The Committee nevertheless remained concerned at the persistence of excessive vacancy rates, particularly for some languages or language functions, at most duty stations with small or medium-sized language services.

12. The Committee recognized that the persistence of excessive vacancy rates at some duty stations reflected mostly the insufficient mobility of language staff, while the still fairly high overall vacancy rate for language services was attributable to recruitment problems, particularly for specific languages and/or language combinations.

13. While commending the determined efforts made by the Secretariat to fill vacancies in the newly established Interpretation Section at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the Committee expressed concern at the lack of success, so far, in filling vacant interpreter posts for some languages. The Committee recommended that, as indicated in paragraph 9 of the report, top priority be given to filling such posts, as well as vacant interpreter posts at the United Nations Office at Vienna, in the recruitment of candidates successful at the 2001 competitive examinations for Arabic and English interpreters, and that

the United Nations Office at Nairobi and United Nations Office at Vienna also be given priority in the recruitment of candidates successful in the competitive examinations for French and Spanish interpreters to be held in January 2002.

14. Concerning the mobility of language staff, the Committee recognized that the need for parity of treatment of language and non-language staff limited the possible effectiveness of a system of incentives in the absence of a Secretariat-wide comprehensive scheme for encouraging and rewarding mobility between duty stations. In that connection, the Committee recommended that the specific requirements of language services at duty stations with chronically high vacancy rates be duly taken into consideration in the further development of criteria for mobility and of mechanisms to provide adequate incentives for mobility between duty stations, which had been requested by the General Assembly in section V of its resolution 55/258 on human resources management. The Committee also recommended that in the meantime the Secretariat continue its practice, which had produced encouraging results, of closely monitoring the vacancy situation at duty stations with chronic vacancy problems and of approaching such problems in a pragmatic, proactive fashion.

15. On recruitment issues, the Committee expressed concern at the low yield of some competitive language examinations, particularly of examinations for interpreters with specific language combinations, and at the fact that candidates successful in such examinations often repeatedly refused offers of employment made by the Organization.

16. The Committee recommended that the Secretariat pursue its efforts to better target the advertising of competitive language examinations by focusing on language schools, other educational institutions and professional associations.

17. In view of the very high success rates achieved in the past through the in-house training programme for interpreters, as described in paragraph 31 of the report (A/55/277), the Committee also recommended that the programme be reinstated for an initial period of one year, subject to the submission to the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session, through the Committee on Conferences, of information on the results of the training activities undertaken, the continuing need for the programme and related financial arrangements.

18. The Committee welcomed the inter-agency initiative to address training issues at their source through cooperation between the United Nations and other international organizations on the one hand and language schools and other educational institutions on the other. The Committee requested the Secretary-General to keep it informed on progress achieved through this initiative.